

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

**SOCIAL/CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN THE PHILIPPINE COUNTER-INSURGENCY**  
**Considerations For Future Operations**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural dynamics are key to success in counter-insurgency (CI) operations. Many lessons from previous CI operations provide valuable insight into future operations. However, no two CI operations are the same. The difference is largely cultural. Because the people are the basic element of the Clausewitzian Trinity, cultural considerations are the underlying determinant of success. Cultural dynamics provide keys to behavior. They impart insight about beliefs, what is important, what has value, what people will fight and die for, what conditions they are willing to cope with to gain their objective, etc. The Philippine Insurrection provides an excellent example of the successful use of cultural dynamics to defeat an Insurgency. Operational art focuses on the military aspects of war; however, one must interpret its scope to include the cultural aspect in each of the elements. Without this dimension, operational art is left without its key--the people. In sum, a study of cultural dynamics reveals some of the most important aspects of how and why people will fight--information operational commanders must consider when planning operations.

## PREFACE

The intent of this paper is **not** to list the lessons learned from previous counter-insurgency (CI) operations for use in future operations. My purpose is to try to show that people and their culture are keys to conducting successful operations. To some degree, all military operations are tied to the cultural aspect of the people involved. Military operations other than war, and specifically, CI operations deal more with indigenous people than conventional large-scale conflict. As a result, applying cultural considerations to the military principles is critical to success. Each CI operation is unique, requiring a peculiar culturally based set of plans. Many lessons can be used in future CI operations; but, they will only be successful if the culture of the people involved is carefully integrated into operational plans.

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## **SOCIAL/CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN THE PHILIPPINE COUNTER-INSURGENCY**

### **Considerations For Future Operations**

"Wars are not tactical exercises writ large.... They are...conflicts of societies, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them."<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

"Never Again!", "No More Vietnams!" We continually hear this phrase in reference to American involvement in Vietnam. The U.S. will likely experience another tragic loss if we do not integrate social and cultural aspects into counter-insurgency (CI) doctrine. Carl von Clausewitz states that war is a paradoxical trinity in which the people, military, and government must be in balance to achieve success.<sup>2</sup> Society provides the base for this Trinity and the concept is meaningless without considering cultural dynamics. The successful CI operation in the Philippines provides an example of how intimate knowledge of social/cultural dynamics, when used to plan operations, balances the Trinity and improves the likelihood of victory.<sup>3</sup> Studying past CI operations provides critical lessons for future operations; however, the cultural dynamics of societies make each one different. Understanding these differences when applying operational art will directly contribute to success. Therefore, it is critical that operational commanders, as the bridge from the strategic to the operational level, consider the cultural dynamics of societies involved in CI operations.

## **What is Society and the Cultural Dynamic?**

Society refers to a group of people forming a single community. It is a system or condition of living together. It is a relatively permanent association of people with common interests who share a set of values. "In simplest form, we can say that a society is always made up of people; their culture is the way they behave. In other words, a society is not a culture; it has a culture."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, a society may have multiple cultures (as in the United States). Culture is the accepted patterns of behavior for a group of people, providing a common understanding base: the ways to think, act, believe, and feel. Cultural norms enable people to get through each day knowing other people encountered "attach somewhat the same meanings to the same things."<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper, use of the term "culture" or "cultural dynamics" will include the social aspects of societies, and will refer to both the people and their behavior.

So what does cultural dynamics have to do with CI operations? A great deal! Cultural dynamics provide a key to insurgent behavior and way of life. They impart insight about beliefs, what is important, what has value, what people will fight and die for, what conditions they are willing to cope with to gain their objective, etc. In sum, a study of cultural dynamics reveals some of the most important aspects of how and why insurgents will fight--information operational commanders must consider when planning operations. Cultural dynamics can provide "ready-made solutions to problems encountered by the group"<sup>6</sup>--it provides an accurate way to predict behavior. Knowledge of the cultural dynamics of insurgents can provide insights into how they perceive our actions. It can help predict what effect actions

will have on the enemy and what behaviors we can expect to see them exhibit. This is critical in determining centers of gravity, planning operations, and bringing the conflict to a successful termination.

There are two primary problems in looking at cultural dynamics of other peoples. First, is the propensity to look at other cultures through the filter of one's own cultural perspective. This tendency tends to distort the true image of other cultures. We see their culture as it relates to ours. Likewise, we tend to judge their values in relation to ours. We tend to weigh everything about them against what we consider right.<sup>7</sup> "It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for any person ever fully to get inside a culture that is not his own."<sup>8</sup> The second problem relates to using culture in predicting a particular action/reaction. "Cultural rules are not like natural laws; knowledge of the rules will not allow prediction for any single case."<sup>9</sup> Cultural rules are more accurate at predicting actions over a period of time or when behavior involves a large number of people. During a time of crisis, a small number of people are usually making decisions for the society. It is quite possible that these individuals may not completely reflect the values of the culture they represent.<sup>10</sup> The resulting actions enacted on behalf of the culture may not reflect what the culture as a whole would choose. Identifying these decision makers and targeting them as determinants of behavior are critical to accurate prediction of behavior. Another facet of this problem is that there may be discrepancies between stated cultural beliefs and what people actually do and believe.<sup>11</sup> This, again, may lead to inaccurate prediction of behavior.

War and conflict of any type are inextricably tied to the cultures involved. Cultural norms shape society in deciding what weapons to acquire, how and when to use them. Moreover, society establishes the rules defining what it will fight for and at what cost. Knowledge of how these cultures cope with problems may give insights into different methods of conflict resolution.<sup>12</sup> Failure to consider cultural dynamics in planning or executing actions at any level of conflict may well lead to disastrous failure.

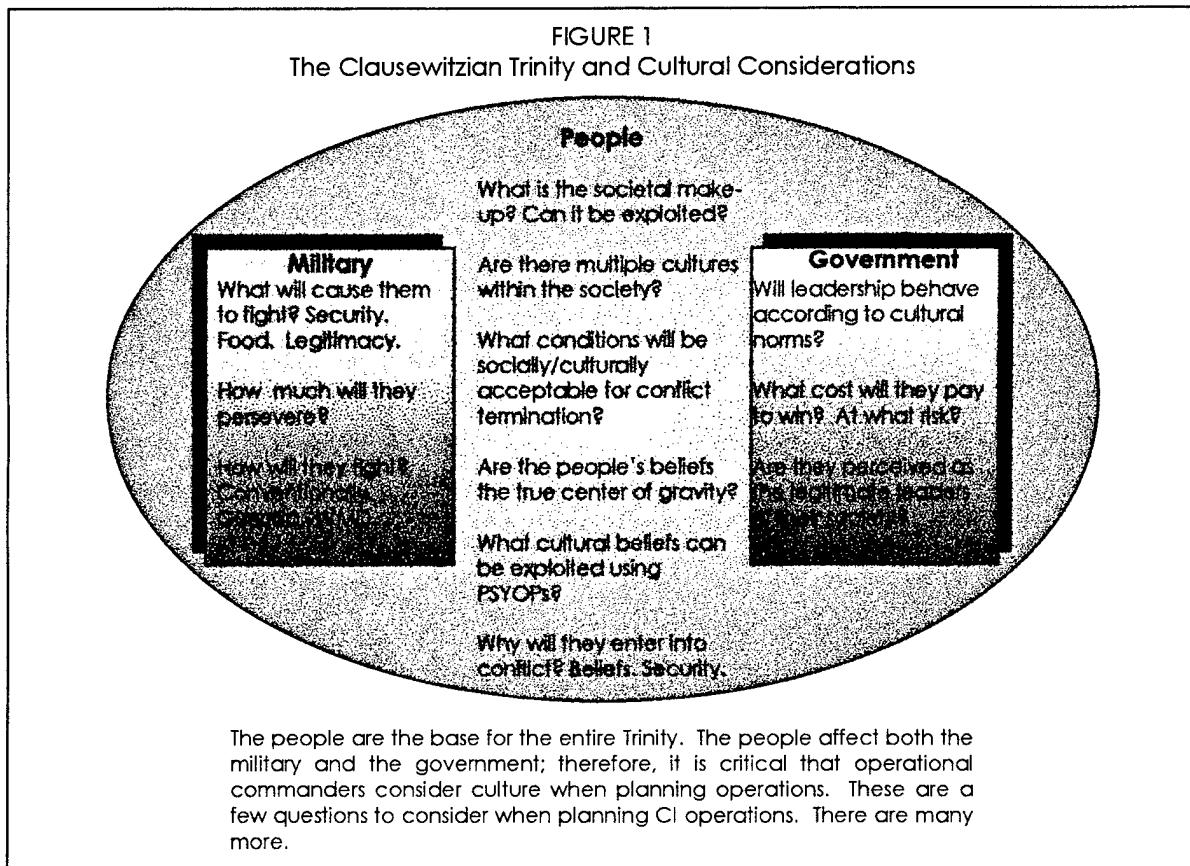
### **The Clausewitzian Trinity and Cultural Dynamics**

Clausewitz does not give cultural dynamics much attention in his famed book "On War." He did, however, make it clear that the people, military, and government must be in balance to facilitate success. He said:

"As a total phenomenon its [war's] dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity--composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone. The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.....Our task therefore is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets."<sup>13</sup>

Could one interpret this to include cultural dynamics? Clausewitz probably did not write this with "cultural dynamics" in mind. We do not commonly think of the Trinity (people, military, government) in this way. Nonetheless, Clausewitz's Trinity is completely dependent on cultural and societal factors. Figure 1 lists some questions that operational commanders should consider when planning CI operations.

FIGURE 1  
The Clausewitzian Trinity and Cultural Considerations



The people are the base for the entire Trinity. The people affect both the military and the government; therefore, it is critical that operational commanders consider culture when planning operations. These are a few questions to consider when planning CI operations. There are many more.

The first element of the Trinity is the people who are clearly steeped in the cultural dynamic. It is the cultural dynamic. Society, culture, or people--simply different names for the same thing. This element ultimately is a significant determinant in how, why, when, and if fighting will occur. This is the basic fabric of conflict--without people, and their various cultures, there would be no conflicts. This is the "blind natural force."

The military (commander and his army) makes up the second element. This includes the "creative spirit." The military, even though members of a military subculture, comes from the more inclusive first element--"the people." Military members bring with them their cultural heritage and beliefs. This cultural heritage

determines how, why, when, and if they will fight and how much "creative spirit" they may demonstrate.

The final element is the government. No government exists for very long without consent of the majority of people. Ultimately, it is the people who allow the government to govern. Once again, the government is made up of the first element--"the people." With these people, the government shares the same cultural heritage (in most cases). Will the government give up power to appease the people? Will it use weapons of mass destruction to stay in power? Cultural dynamics contain the answers to these questions and determines how, why, when, and if the people who make up the government will fight.

Although we do not classically think of the Trinity in this light, ultimately, the Clausewitzian Trinity *is* the cultural dynamic. Generally, the focus is on getting the support of the people, making sure the military has the right tools to fight, and having a government set forth a coherent, attainable policy. This is a very narrow view. Looking at the Trinity with a wide angle lens, clearly, everything in it is dependent on the culture of the society. The basic elements are the people **and their culture**. CI operations, by their nature, are influenced more by "the people" element of the Trinity than other forms of conflict.<sup>14</sup>

### **Cultural Dynamics in the Philippine Insurrection (1946-1955)**

The situation of the Philippines in 1946 clearly demonstrates how a nation can deteriorate when their Trinity is out of balance. The imbalance was evident when

Ramon Magsaysay and Colonel (later Major General) Edward Lansdale began their CI operations.

"Between present circumstances and the achievement of our goals lay the Communist party and its guerrilla army aggressively dominating the scene, the ills in Philippine society that provided soil for rebellion to flourish, and a government military force that we felt was largely out of touch with reality or with the people it must defend."<sup>15</sup>

Magsaysay effectively used the principles of military operations other than war (MOOTW) in prosecuting his campaign.<sup>16</sup> To determine the operational **objectives** required complete analysis of the cultural dynamics at work within Philippine Trinity. Philippine farmers were becoming disenchanted with their government in the early 1920's. Poor social conditions, lack of independence from the United States, and farmers paying 50%-70% of their crops to landlords for rent contributed to their dissatisfaction.<sup>17</sup> "The people" were ready for the entry of the Communist party whose activities were eventually declared illegal. As a result, the Manila government instituted minor reforms after rioting and murders occurred. This inadequate attempt to appease the peasants failed as the courts, landlords, and the government all ignored the reforms.

The insurgents emerged from the local populace in response to the Japanese threat of WWII. While the official Philippine government cooperated with the Japanese, the communists took to the hills in their fight against the Japanese.<sup>18</sup> This is where they got their name: Hukbalahap (Huk)--Anti-Japanese Army. Through the war Huk military organization matured. They organized village defense corps and created councils made up of "elected" officials. They hoped to influence future

local and national elections.<sup>19</sup> At the conclusion of WWII the new Philippine government was completely out of synch with the people. It was corrupt and inefficient.<sup>20</sup> The stage was set for the post-war insurrection--the Clausewitzian Trinity was completely out of balance due to changes in cultural dynamics.

Considering the Philippine society and cultural dynamics, Magsaysay's first operational objective was the military leg of the Trinity. Magsaysay's continuously unexpected visits at military units changed the socially acceptable habit of corruption. He found such things as personnel selling leather off the bottom of soldiers' boots and replacing it with cardboard, and new spark plugs in government vehicles sold and replaced with old ones.<sup>21</sup> His visits forced the military culture to change. Additionally, he changed the way promotions occurred. The existing military culture dictated that promotion be based on seniority and good reports. The new criterion was combat experience.<sup>22</sup> Magsaysay achieved his first objective of cleaning up the military by changing their culture. What was once acceptable--corruption, lack of focus, etc.--became unacceptable. Magsaysay demanded that each soldier be dedicated first to the people, then to killing guerrillas!<sup>23</sup>

When Magsaysay's efforts began to achieve success in changing the military culture, he focused on winning the people and instilling trust in the government. The operational objective was to separate the people from the insurgent Huks.

Magsaysay applied **unity of effort**. He directed all means to a common objective--winning the people and legitimizing the government. He changed the military focus to include civic actions. He used psychological operations not only on the insurgents, but on the government troops, to change their attitudes toward the

civilian population.<sup>24</sup> Colonel Lansdale hosted coffees with civilian and military people resulting in valuable intelligence. These meetings brought out such ideas as the Economic Development Corps (EDCOR) and the ten centavo telegram program.<sup>25</sup> Both these programs worked on society to gain the allegiance of the people. EDCOR created new villages where former Huks and peasant farmers received land to farm. Success stories circulated and the propaganda effect was incredible. Not only did the peasants react positively but the program achieved a secondary objective of diminishing the ranks of the Huks. The ten centavo telegram allowed anyone to send a telegram to Magsaysay. This made the people feel that someone in the government would listen to them. It also gave Magsaysay valuable intelligence. Both these programs positively affected the people and further diminished the insurgents' recruiting base. Additionally, they enhanced the government element of the Trinity.

Magsaysay used these programs and others to enhance **security** and **legitimacy**, through **restraint** and **perseverance**. Sabotaging Huk armaments curbed attacks on civilians and the military. Once the military found a Huk supply channel, it was used to insert faulty equipment. The psychological impact was a fear to use their weapons.<sup>26</sup> Perseverance paid off--the open supply channel psychologically and physically weakened the enemy by encouraging mistrust within the insurgent social order. Enhanced security resulted, as the Huks were afraid to attempt raids on government troops. Use of restraint was a trade mark of this CI operation. Magsaysay did not fight large conventional battles--he was willing to wait and persevere. One interesting technique involved government troops

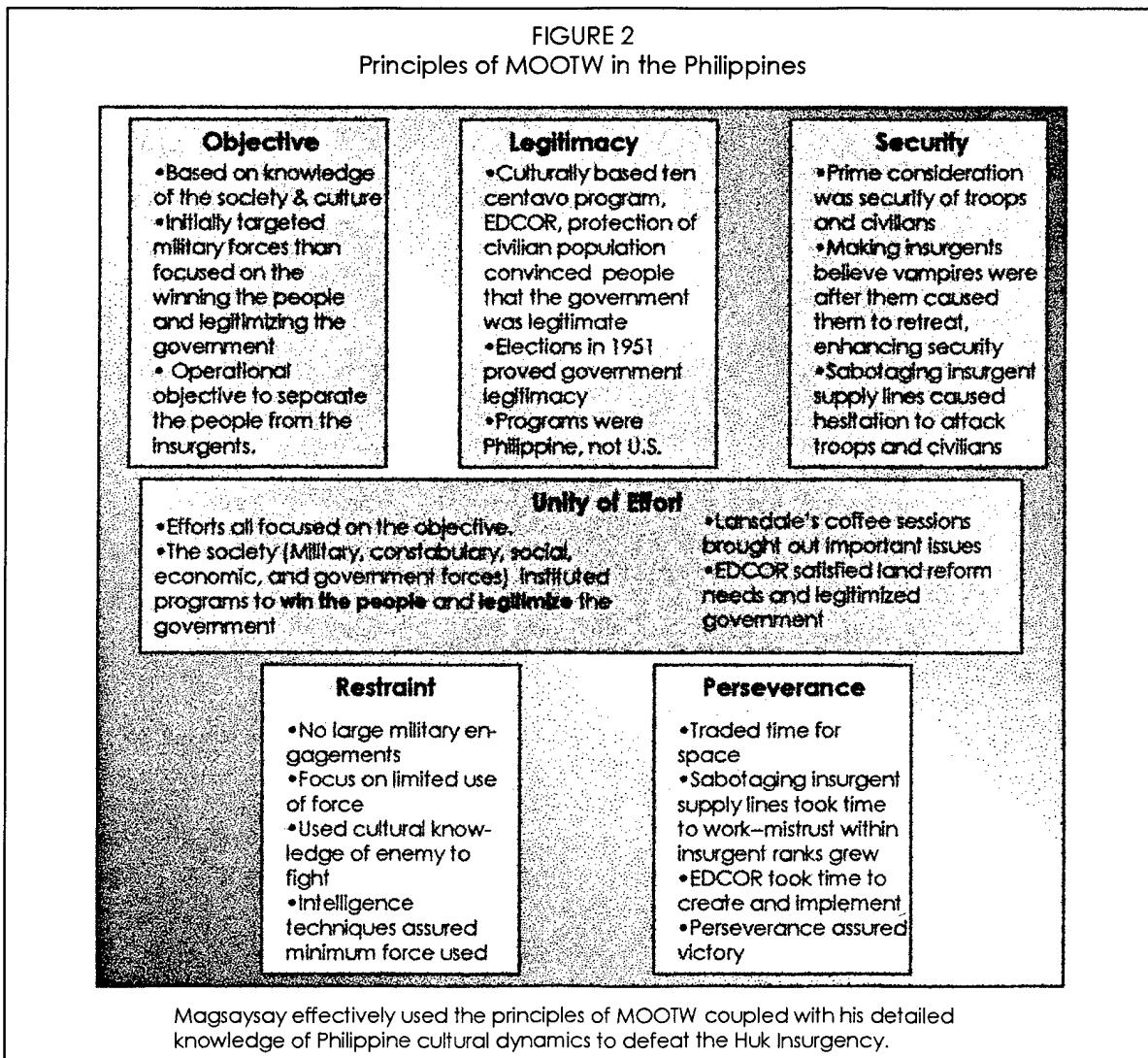
shadowing Huk patrols. At an opportune time, they would ambush the trailing Huk, puncture his neck with two holes, drain his blood, and leave him on the trail for the remainder of the Huk patrol to see.<sup>27</sup> This was actually an ingenious psychological warfare technique based in the Philippine culture. The Huks believed that vampires lived in the hills they were fighting in--finding these bodies proved to them that the vampires existed. The whole Huk squadron would move out of the area the next day! This enhanced the security of the troops and more importantly, the civilian population. Heightened security further demonstrated the Philippine government's legitimacy to the people and their ability to prevent insurgent re-infiltration.

The culminating point came in November 1951.<sup>28</sup> As a result of Magsaysay's efforts the civilians and military united, leaving the Huks outside the national family.<sup>29</sup> The climactic event was the elections. The military guarded the polls, assured the integrity of the ballot boxes, and prevented intimidation of the voters.<sup>30</sup> This election proved to the people that their government was legitimate, that it did listen to the voice of the people, and that it could provide for their security. From this point forward, the Huks were on the run.

The key to the Philippine Insurrection success story is cultural dynamics. Magsaysay used his knowledge of his people's culture and society to exploit Huk weaknesses and build strengths in the population. He applied the principles of MOOTW in light of his culture and society. (See Figure 2.) The unique characteristics of the Philippine culture and society were the basis of each of the programs he implemented. EDCOR, the ten centavo telegram, using vampires to influence the Huks were all culturally based. Another primary factor was the work of Colonel

Lansdale. Colonel Lansdale was not just another military advisor. He went out and got to know the people and their culture. More importantly, he became a trusted advisor and friend to Magsaysay. Colonel Lansdale "went far beyond the usual bounds given a military man after [he] discovered just what the people on these battlegrounds needed to guard against and what to keep strong."<sup>31</sup> "Going far beyond" required that Colonel Lansdale know the cultural dynamics of the people of the Philippines. Unfortunately, we were unable (or unwilling) to apply this use of the cultural dynamics to our efforts in Vietnam. The results were disastrous!

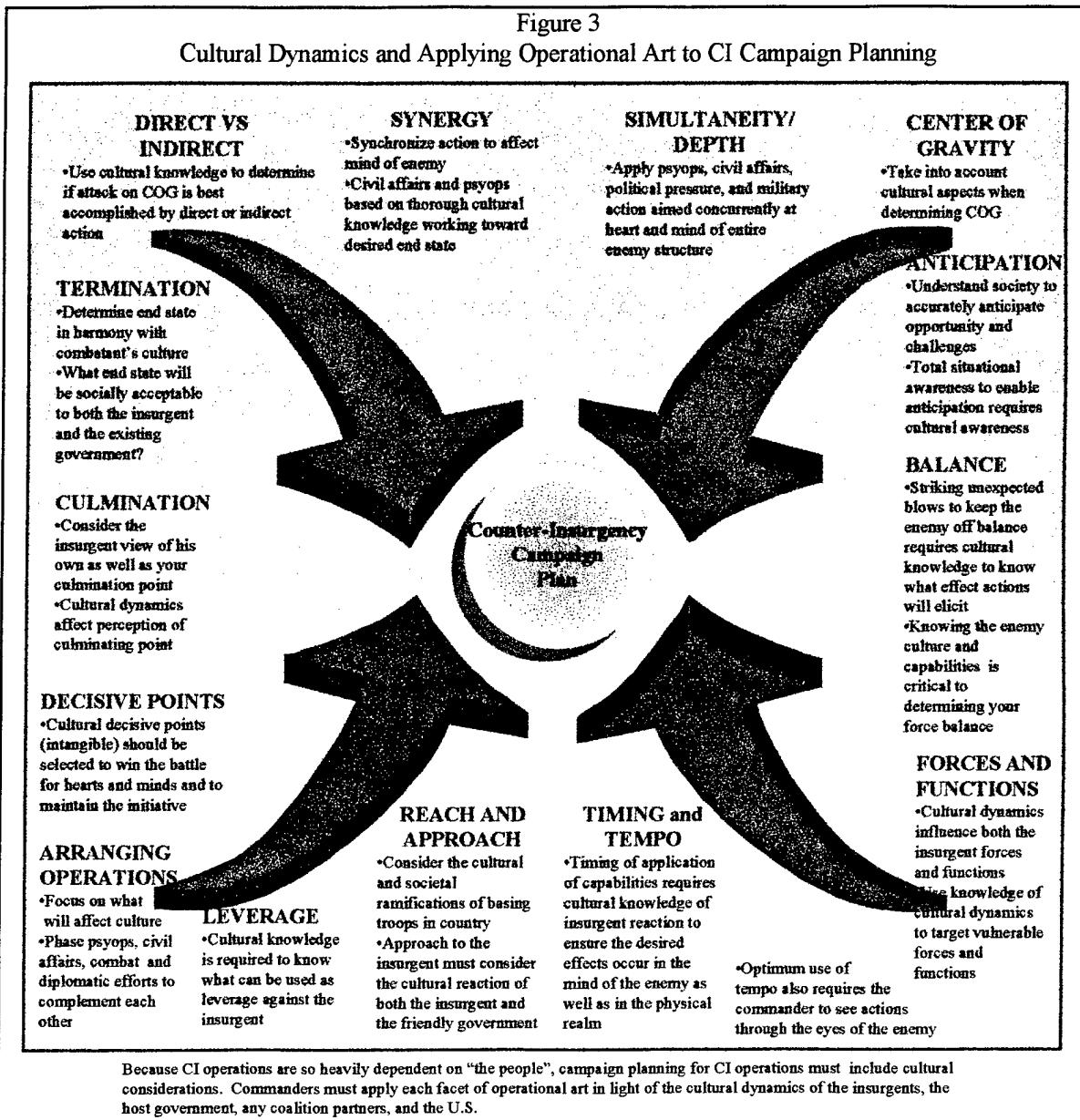
FIGURE 2  
Principles of MOOTW in the Philippines



## Operational Art and Cultural Dynamics in CI Operations

Joint Force Commanders (JFC) employ operational art in developing campaigns and operations.<sup>32</sup> If the JFC is to properly employ operational art in CI operations, cultural dynamics must be a prime consideration. Figure 3 shows some examples of applying cultural dynamics to operational art.

Figure 3  
Cultural Dynamics and Applying Operational Art to CI Campaign Planning



Synergy involves employing forces in a wide variety of ways. "JFCs not only attack the enemy's **physical capabilities**, but also the enemy's **morale** and **will**."<sup>33</sup> How can you attack the "enemy's morale and will" without understanding him--his culture, the structure of his society, what is important to him? Operational synergy against the enemy's morale and will is only possible through considering his cultural dynamics. In CI operations we are not always talking about synchronizing air, sea, and land action--we are synchronizing actions to affect the enemy's mind. This may include air, land, and sea events; more likely, are events such as deciding when to implement civil programs and what propaganda and psychological operations will provide a synergistic effect. Synergy, in this realm, occurs in the **mind** of the enemy.

"Anticipation is the key to effective planning."<sup>34</sup> How can you anticipate if you do not understand the enemy's motivation? JFCs consider what may happen and the impact of their operations. Cultural undertones clearly abound. Every action the JFC takes is designed to elicit some response. Anticipation of this response must be based on knowledge of the enemy--more than just his capabilities--it must include the enemy thought process, his beliefs, his intent, and how he may use his capabilities. To anticipate enemy reaction, each action requires the JFC to see through the enemy's eyes. A target, while not significant to us, may represent something very different to the enemy society. Anticipation requires a thorough knowledge of the enemy based on accurate intelligence regarding the enemy's cultural dynamics.

A center of gravity (COG) is the "foundation of all capability."<sup>35</sup> Knowing the enemy COG is critical to achieving the objective. But what is the true COG? Does

one define it by the American Way of War? Probably not! To find the answer requires cultural knowledge. Does the enemy have cultural beliefs that will cause him to use his power in unique ways? A culture may believe that it is acceptable (and even good thing) to die while killing the enemy. This belief has a significant effect on how they fight and therefore is a possible COG. COGs can be spiritual, economic, social, military, etc. The possibilities are vast and the consequences of missing the true COG are considerable.

Psychological operations (psyops) can achieve an objective where military force is inappropriate. It helps to minimize expenditures while maximizing effects.<sup>36</sup> Psyops focuses on the people--which means it focuses on their culture. Some cultures in Africa believe that wearing clothes made from certain material will make them bullet-proof.<sup>37</sup> This culturally based belief is a perfect candidate for psychological operations. Showing the people that this belief is false may cause mass exodus from the ranks of the soldiers. However, there is a danger--these same people also believe that certain amulets will provide the same protection. If one attacks these beliefs, what will the result be? Will the people turn to other forms of protection? Will their society endure a change in their beliefs? Commanders must possess thorough cultural knowledge to successfully prosecute psyops. Incomplete knowledge may do more harm than good! Magsaysay masterfully used psyops in his CI operation while the U.S. failed to effectively use psyops in Vietnam. The difference was knowledge of cultural dynamics. Psyops have enormous potential for influencing operations; however, successful psyops require cultural knowledge.

The bottom line is cultural dynamics affect operational art. Some areas such as the COG and anticipation are more affected than others--but every aspect of CI operations must consider cultural dynamics. As General Lansdale successfully did in the Philippines, the JFC must understand the culture of the people involved to be effective.

## **Conclusion**

Culture is the underlying basis of the Clausewitzian Trinity. This trinity applies to all levels of conflict. It follows that cultural dynamics are critical to CI operations. Operational art focuses on the military aspects of war. However, one must interpret its scope to include the cultural aspect in each of the elements. Without this dimension, operational art is left without its key--the people. No planning is adequate without considering cultural dynamics. There is a myriad of books and papers on lessons learned from past counter-insurgency operations. They have valid lessons that apply to future operations. There is a risk, however--one must consider each lesson in the context of the new situation. "If we tried to apply techniques that worked elsewhere without a situation specific approach, we would fail."<sup>38</sup> The bottom line--each situation is different. "While there are certain universals, or kinds of values, found in all cultures, there are no absolutes which apply equally to all societies, and all values are therefore relative to time, place, and circumstance."<sup>39</sup> Planning CI operations requires consideration of the culture of each society involved. As Sun Tzu stated, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."<sup>40</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Howard, quoted in Lawrence E. Grinter, "Cultural and Historical Influence on Conflict Behavior in Sinic Asia" in The International Dimension of Culture and Conflict, CADRE/RI, Maxwell AFB, AL, April 1991, page 21

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1976, page 89

<sup>3</sup> Some consider the Philippine CI operation an aberration because Ramon Magsaysay brought a unique personality to bear. While Magsaysay's strong personality was a factor, his programs clearly considered the culture of the people--resulting in an exemplary CI operation.

<sup>4</sup> Ina Cornine Brown, Understanding Other Cultures, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963, page 6

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., page 4

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., page 5

<sup>7</sup> We learn the values of our society. As a general rule we consider these values "right." Deviation from this norm appears "wrong." Therefore, as we look at cultures that do things differently, we tend to think that it is a back thing--not just different.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, page 14

<sup>9</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, "Compromise and the Rhetoric of Good and Evil" in The Social Dynamics of Peace and Conflict, ed. by Robert A. Rubenstein and Mary LeCron Foster, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1988, page 38

<sup>10</sup> Alastair Lain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture", International Security, v.19, n.4, Spring 1995, page 43

<sup>11</sup> Brown, page 160

<sup>12</sup> Mary LeCron Foster and Robert A. Rubenstein, "Introduction", in Peace and War: Cross-Cultural Prospectives, ed. by Mary LeCron Foster and Robert A. Rubenstein, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ, 1986, page xii

<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz, page 89

<sup>14</sup> All forms of military operations other than war (MOOTW) are significantly influenced by "the people" element of the Trinity. CI operations (whether considered a MOOTW or not) and MOOTW are dependent on the population more than convention, large-scale conflict.

<sup>15</sup> Edward G. Lansdale, In the Midst of Wars, Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1972, page 37

<sup>16</sup> Joint Staff, Joint Pub 3-07: Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War, Washington DC, Office of the Chairman, JCS, 1995, Page II-2

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence M. Greenberg, The Hukbalahap Insurrection: A Case Study of a Successful Anti-Insurgency Operation in the Philippines - 1946-1955, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington DC, 1987, page 8

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., page 13

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., page 21-23

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., page 30-31

<sup>21</sup> Lansdale, page 42

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., page 45

<sup>23</sup> Greenberg, page 146

<sup>24</sup> Lansdale, page 70

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., page 47-50

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., page 75

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., page 72

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., page 85

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., page 85

<sup>30</sup> Greenberg, page 138

<sup>31</sup> Lansdale, page ix

<sup>32</sup> Joint Staff, Joint Pub 3-0: Doctrine for Joint Operations, Washington DC, Office of the Chairman, JCS, 1995, page III-9

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., page III-9

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., page III-12

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., page III-20

<sup>36</sup> Richard G. Stilwell, "Political-Psychological Dimensions of Counterinsurgency", in Psychological Operations and Case Studies, ed. by Frank L. Goldstein, Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, AL, Sep 96, page 319

<sup>37</sup> Amb Laurie Peters, Class Discussion for "Emerging Third World Countries", U.S. Naval War College,

15 Jan 97

<sup>38</sup> John D. Waghelstein, "Ruminations of a Pachyderm or What I Learned in the Counter-Insurgency Business", in Small Wars and Insurgencies, v.5, n.3, Winter 1994, page 368

<sup>39</sup> Brown, page 159

<sup>40</sup> Sun Tzu, The Art of War, translated by Samuel Griffith, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1963, page 84

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